

Interview with Claiborne Pell

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is April 9, 1987, I am interviewing Senator Claiborne Pell concerning the time he was in the Foreign Service. Senator Pell, what were the factors family, schooling, military or something else that led you into the Foreign Service?

PELL: I traveled abroad a great deal abroad as a child. My father had passed the old diplomatic exams before World War I, did not stay in the Service and then later had been appointed and then later had been appointed by President Roosevelt chief of mission in Portugal and Hungary. For those reasons I had seen a good deal of the Foreign Service. I should note my father had passed the diplomatic exams in about 1912. In 1924 with the passage of the Rogers Act there had been the combining of the diplomatic and consular services. Various members of my family had been diplomats. My mother's great grand uncle had been minister to St. Petersburg and to the Court of St. James [George M. Dallas: Russia - 1837-39; Britain -1856-61] and then another direct forebear named John Pell was Oliver Cromwell's minister to the Swiss cantons. My stepmother's and cousin's grandfather was Lincoln's minister to Paris [John Bigelow: 1865-66] so I always had diplomacy in my background. I think I am correct in saying that I am the only ex-Foreign Service Officer who has been a senator.

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Q: Did you work at all with your father when he was in Portugal from 1937 to 1941?

PELL: I was his private secretary through that winter of 1940-41 and got a great deal out of it.

Q: You must had a great deal to do with the refugees that were coming down from France at that time?

PELL: They were starting to come in great numbers and my father was very interested in their plight.

Q: When you came out of the Coast Guard at the end of the war had you planned to go into the Foreign Service at that time?

PELL: In all honesty, no. The Coast Guard had plans for occupying some Pacific islands for a long time to come and because of the training I had had during the war by the Navy (the Coast Guard being under the Navy in wartime) I would have probably been in the occupying forces. One reason I took the Foreign Service exams was that it seemed a way of avoiding a long, boring occupation period on a pacific island after the war had ended. So I took the exams in that highly relaxed spirit and to my surprise passed.

Q: When you came into the Foreign Service in 1945 did you have any training before you went out to your first posting?

PELL: Oh, yes. There was the Foreign Service school and our whole class, there were about 30 of us, had about six weeks training.

Q: Did you find the training adequate?

PELL: I think it was about as good as could be done in that short period of time.

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Q: Could you characterize the attitude of your class? You were a unique group. Most of you had military experience.

PELL: Without exception.

Q: You were going into a brand new world in which the United States was number one which was also a new era for the United States. Were you prepared for this new world?

PELL: Maybe prepared is too strong a word, but we were anticipating our work with great glee and delight. The training was pretty good and, as you pointed out, we were all military people. The Foreign Service exams we took were a little less stringent than the prewar ones for they needed to get people in more quickly. My recollection is that the exams only took two days instead of the usual three.

Q: Did you ask for Czechoslovakia or Eastern Europe?

PELL: No, this was just a random assignment. I know I would have loved to have fulfilled my original assignment, that was as third secretary to Tirana, Albania, but unfortunately our mission was closed at that time and I was sent to Czechoslovakia. Albania is the only country in Europe that I have never visited.

Q: Not many have been there since the war.

PELL: Virtually no Americans have been there.

Q: What were your duties when you first went to Prague?

PELL: I was in the consular section and my duties were to determine who was LPC (Likely Public Charge) [a visa applicant who was likely to be unable to support him or herself] who would get visas and who would not get visas. I was also the protocol officer.

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Q: The ambassador there was Laurence Steinhardt, he has been described to me as somewhat a tough character of the old school. How did you find him?

PELL: Laurence Steinhardt was very much an individualist, tough, competent, a lawyer. He started out as a political appointee but acquired a great deal of service and expert knowledge. He was a pretty darned good ambassador, although a fundamental mistake of judgement was made towards the end of my tour of duty there, where it was inevitable to my mind that the Communists would have to have a putsch because they were not going to do as well in the upcoming elections [spring 1948] as they had previously. They and the Soviets could not afford to do worse because they felt that Czechoslovakia was, as the Russians termed it, a "dagger in their side". I know that I predicted such a putsch. I sent a memorandum up [to the embassy from Bratislava] which is a matter of record, to the effect that I felt that there would not be a peaceful turnover of government when the Communists were forced to reduce their strength by the vote [this refers to the scheduled spring elections of 1948 - which never took place due to the Communist takeover in February 1948] and therefore there would have to be a military putsch to avoid such an election. This is just what occurred, but this prediction of mine from Bratislava was not forwarded by the embassy to Washington. I think that the people in the mission put a little too much faith in the Social Democrats and thought they would prevail and they probably would have prevailed if there had been, as I foresaw, a fair election. But, the Communists would not permit a fair election.

Q: I know that just as you arrived in July of 1946 Ambassador Steinhardt was reporting [as published in the Foreign Relations series] that Clement Gottwald was a "a thorough Czech patriot and unlikely to embark on extreme measures" which in retrospect seems not to be the case. Were other officers in the embassy concerned about this peculiar mix of communists and non-communists in the Czech government?

PELL: I really don't recall, it was more than forty years ago.

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Q: Were you having to deal with the Sudeten Deutsche or Czechs who were coming into your office for visas?

PELL: These were mostly Czechs.

Q: Did you get to travel much when you were stationed in Prague?

PELL: Yes a great deal. We would go out each weekend in our car and get as much traveling in as we could.

Q: Was it your impression that the Czechs were leaning towards the Russians until things got difficult?

PELL: No. You know the Czechs wanted to join the Marshall Plan and the IBRD.

Q: I know they were forced to reject the Marshall plan because of Soviet pressure.

PELL: But they definitely leaned towards the west.

Q: You were assigned to Bratislava to open the consulate general, why were we interested in opening a post there?

PELL: Actually I had resigned from the Foreign Service at that time, but then when the opportunity to have my own post came, I requested the Department [of State] to withdraw their acceptance of my resignation which they were nice enough to do. My dear friend and supporter and a man I literally worshiped, Charles Yost was at that time Counselor of the embassy helped me with this. I was stimulated by the thought of having my own post, it was a real challenge.

Q: Why did you think about resigning at that point?

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PELL: Well I had my own economic independence. I had lots of ideas of what I wanted to do. I thought of publishing my own newspaper or maybe publishing a magazine or teaching. I really wanted more freedom to move around in my own country than I would have in the Foreign Service.

Q: Why were we interested in opening a post in Bratislava?

PELL: Because we have many Americans of Slovak extraction, I think more Americans are of Slovak extraction than of Czech extraction, it was a very important political listening post for eastern Europe and an important historic city which was called in various languages Pozsony, Pressburg, and Bratislava, respectively in Hungarian, German and Slovak.

Q: I notice that Ambassador Steinhardt was sending cables back to Washington complaining that we did not have a post in Bratislava, and saying that the Russians, British and French did have posts there. Were you given much support when you went to Bratislava or were you pretty much on your own when you went to open up this post?

PELL: I was given whatever support that seemed proper. We had to live in a hotel when we were getting it going. Eventually our Government had a good building, which we still own. I had sort of my own USIS operation on the ground [floor] with magazines and books, and then offices on the next two floors. My wife and I rented a house not too far away.

Q: What was the major work you were doing in Bratislava?

PELL: The major work there was political reporting.

Q: What was the situation there? I go back to the official record, Ambassador Steinhardt was saying that Slovakia was the most ripe area in Czechoslovakia for a Soviet style coup.

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PELL: The Slovaks were very independent; they were very conservative, very religious and for the Communists to get anywhere there they would have to do it by force, by putsch not by popular election.

Q: Things were moving towards an election in the spring of 1948 there was this putsch in February 1948.

PELL: As I explained the election was coming which would have had the Communists doing much worse than they had and the Communists and Russians could not permit that to occur and they had to intervene to make sure they had control of Czechoslovakia.

Q: You were reporting your observations of this phenomenon from Bratislava, but this was not being included in the reports from the embassy as far as you know?

PELL: As far as I know.

Q: After the Czech Communists took over were you and your staff in Bratislava put under particular pressure at that time by the authorities, the police?

PELL: Not particularly. Of course I was followed wherever I went driving. I used to go walking or running and they would keep tabs on us, following me. They did arrest a couple of my people, one man who was working for me as an interpreter was terribly beaten up and abused and then a couple who had worked for me were arrested and maltreated - very badly treated. One man who had driven for me, was reported to me as having been beaten to death. So it was a grim business when the Communists took over, about half my staff was either put in jail or fled.

Q: These were all Czech citizens?

PELL: Yes, John Hvasta was a dual citizen.

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Q: When you left Bratislava, your next assignment was Genoa?

PELL: That is correct.

Q: Had you asked for that?

PELL: No, I had been assigned to the Netherlands East Indies, but I did not want to take my family there so the Department was nice enough to send me to Genoa instead.

Q: In Genoa what type of work did you do?

PELL: Again I did consular work, immigration, visas, looking after Americans who were in jail. I had to inspect a couple of coffins to make sure they did not contain drugs. The usual consular jobs. I also did some political reporting.

Q: What was your impression of Italy? It had just gone through election of 1948 which was sort of the crucial one where there was a challenge by the Communists?

PELL: Well I loved Italy, loved it before the war, during the war and loved it after the war. I was stationed during the war in Sicily and Naples. [On my arrival in Genoa in 1948] Italy was just starting to recover from the war and holding off the Communist threat. There had been a very tight election as you remarked. It was a good time to be there, you felt the country bounding back.

Q: In contrast to Czechoslovakia?

PELL: There it was more depressing. I was there when the putsch took place, when Jan Masaryk was defenestrated, or defenestrated himself, and it was a very tough period.

Q: You had expressed doubts before about being in the Foreign Service, when you went to Genoa were you thinking at that point of continuing it as a career?

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PELL: Yes, but when I was there I got into a pretty bad argument with my consul general. An inspector went through the post and said to me, "Young man, what can we do to improve this post?" At that point I really did not have enough work, only four or five hours work spread over an eight hour day. I would not have minded if I could have gone out in the afternoon, but you had to spend eight hours there in the consulate general stretching this work out. So I said: "Please, could we have fewer vice consuls here and then we would be busy all day." Then he went to the consul general and said: "What can we do to improve your post?" The consul general said he needed another vice consul to carry the load of work. Then the inspector did the inexcusable and quoted me to the consul general, and that caused a very bad relationship with situation in the consul general.

Q: After a year or so you were assigned back to Washington?

PELL: That is right, I became the special assistant in the Office of Eastern European Affairs with Charles Yost, my hero in the Foreign Service, as my boss.

Q: What were your responsibilities there?

PELL: Just being a political officer, going through the mail, the press, responsible for writing letters and policy statements; all in very minor way, I was still a very minor cog in a rather large wheel.

Q: You left the Foreign Service about this time, what was the reason?

PELL: I liked politics and wanted to exercise my independence. I was offered a political job of being the campaign director for Averell Harriman in his campaign for president. I wasn't doing terribly well in the Foreign Service, I had gotten into arguments on occasion and it just seemed an appropriate time to move on.

Q: Looking back on the Foreign Service from today, what did you see as its strengths and weaknesses?

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PELL: I think that when I was in it it was more elite, a more Ivy League outfit than it is today. Some people would say it was better and some would say was worse. You have to bear in mind that the people with whom you are dealing come from rather elite backgrounds themselves [officials from other countries]. I was always impressed with the Foreign Service. Morale goes up and down somewhat regularly dependent on those who achieve ambassadorial status who are career as opposed to those who are non-career. I think the differences are the very obvious ones, women can now belong and more blacks are in it and you have a broader cross section of America which is a real asset.

Q: One final question Senator. You were in Czechoslovakia at climatic time of East-West relations, it was perhaps the pivotal point. A democratic government was taken over from within by the Communists and you were there at the beginning and end of this act that took a year or more to happen. Has this had any effect on you now that have been involved in foreign affairs, East-West relations for so many years? Is this experience something that you have taken with you in your other role as Senator?

PELL: Yes, it has sensitized me to the dangers of Communism. It has also impressed upon me the poor and unsuccessful system that Communism is. It goes against human nature, the very natural desire to acquire a little property for your children, to worship freely, to travel freely to engage in politics freely, to express your opinions freely. These are all human tendencies no matter where you are. When you live behind the Iron Curtain for a little bit you really get a very strong impression of how much one dislikes their system of Communism. I know when I went over there I was rather conscious of some of its theoretical features about which we were taught in the colleges of America at the time of the late Thirties. But then, when you were exposed to it, you realized that it really was a pretty dreadful system. Moreover, the present Communists go back to the past's Bolsheviks and really are willing to seize and to carry out any opportunity.

Q: Thank you very much.

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End of interview